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DE RUEHLM #0514/01 1311228
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
O 111228Z MAY 09
FM AMEMBASSY COLOMBO
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 9954
INFO RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 1172
RUEHTH/AMEMBASSY ATHENS 0248
RUEHBK/AMEMBASSY BANGKOK 3818
RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA 1651
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD 8653
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU 6888
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 4960
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 3017
RUEHNY/AMEMBASSY OSLO 4921
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 4027
RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI 9280
RUEHB1/AMCONSUL MUMBAI 6587
RUEHON/AMCONSUL TORONTO 1128
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA 3508
RHHMUNA/HQ USPACOM HONOLULU HI
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC
RHEHAAA/NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL WASHINGTON DC
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC
RHMFIUU/CDRUSARPAC FT SHAFTER HI//APCW/APOP//
RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI//J3/J332/J52//

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SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

STATE FOR SCA (BOUCHER), SCA/INS AND PRM
STATE ALSO PASS USAID
AID/W FOR ANE/SCA, DCHA/FFP (DWORKEN, KSHEIN)
AID/W FOR DCHA/OFDA (MORRISP, ACONVERY, RTHAYER, RKERR)
ATHENS FOR PCARTER
BANGKOK FOR USAID/DCHA/OFDA (WBERGER)
KATHMANDU FOR USAID/DCHA/OFDA AND POL (SBERRY)
GENEVA FOR RMA (NKYLOH, NHILGERT, MPITOTTI)
USUN NEW YORK FOR ECOSOC (D MERCADO)
SECDEF FOR OSD - POLICY
PACOM ALSO FOR J-5

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PREF MOPS PHUM PGOV PREL ASEC CE
SUBJECT: Northern Sri Lanka SitRep 69

REF: A) Colombo 507 B) Colombo 501 C) Colombo 492 D) Colombo 484 E)
Colombo 477 F) Colombo 470 G) Colombo 469 H) Colombo 464 I) Colombo
459 J) Colombo 456 K) Colombo 454 and previous

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: Heavy shelling in the conflict zone on May 9 and 10 resulted in the deaths of at least several hundred civilians. Each side of the conflict blamed the other. Foreign Minister Bogollagama disputed accusations against Government forces in a May 11 meeting with Charge. The Government redefined the boundaries of the so-called "safe zone" to an area of approximately one square mile as the Army pushes further southward. Despite the President's April 27 announcement of an end to major combat, Embassy has a credible report that that the Sri Lankan Air Force conducted an air raid on an LTTE position south of the safe zone on May 10. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs is reportedly threatening to declare the UN Spokesman in Colombo persona non grata for his comments to the press. INR/HIU please see action request in final paragraph. END SUMMARY.

HEAVY DEATHTOLL FROM SHELLING

12. (SBU) Heavy shelling in the conflict zone killed at least 300 civilians on May 9 and 10. A medical worker in the conflict zone reported that 378 civilians were killed and over 1,000 injured. A priest in the conflict zone reports over 1,000 civilian deaths. Pro-LTTE website Tamilnet reports that 1,200 bodies were counted following alleged Government shelling, and alleges that over 2,000

civilians were killed (Note: estimates on this website cannot be substantiated and are often exaggerated). The Government claims the LTTE was responsible for the shelling and that the international media has been "blinded" by the LTTE. A local newspaper reported that Defense Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapaksa called the accusations "ridiculous," saying, "The army couldn't have mounted a large scale artillery assault without the international community knowing it... Had they employed satellites to monitor the area of operations, they would have known the ground situation."

The Government accused the LTTE of firing and killing a number of fleeing civilians.

13. (SBU) The Government has redrawn the outlines of a new civilian "safe zone" within the former one. The new area is just 2 kilometers long and 1.5 kilometers wide, located south of Karaiyamullivaikal.

14. (SBU) A Sri Lankan Army contact notes that 58 and 53 Divisions advanced southward about 500 to 600 meters overnight, May 10 to 11. The Army contact says the LTTE is still resisting but is growing weaker; the Army hopes to complete this phase in the next few days. The Army faces no more earthen berms, but numerous trenches and a high concentration of LTTE landmines, IEDs and booby traps. Army contacts believe senior LTTE leadership is still in the conflict zone. A contact in the Sri Lankan Navy reports no naval engagements in the last 24 hours, but says that Army intercepts confirmed that Sea Tiger Deputy Cheliyan was killed on the northern LTTE ditch-cum-bund over the weekend.

AIR STRIKE SOUTH OF CIVILIAN AREA

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15. (SBU) The Embassy has credible information that the Sri Lankan Air Force conducted an air strike south of the civilian safe zone yesterday afternoon, May 10. (Comment: While this may not have taken place within the newly-delimited and smaller "safe zone", it violates President Rajapaksa's April 27 commitment to cease all use of heavy weapons and aerial bombing. End Comment.)

16. (SBU) Post has not found substantiated reports of an air strike within the parameters of the new "safe zone". Aid agencies have advised post that, in practice, shelling has been more indiscriminate than airstrikes, and therefore poses a greater risk to civilians. Aid agencies with contacts in the conflict zone do not have an accurate count of casualties.

GOVERNMENT DENIES CAUSING CIVILIAN CASUALTIES

17. (SBU) Charge met with Foreign Minister Bogollagama on May 11 to express grave concern over reports of several hundred civilian deaths in the safe zone over the weekend. The Minister insisted the government is honoring its commitment to cease the use of heavy artillery and aerial bombing. He underscored the point by arguing that the current safe zone is too small to use heavy artillery, which would endanger civilians inside the safe zone and military forces operating just outside the zone. He maintained that the reports were LTTE propaganda intended to embarrass the GSL prior to a May 11 UN briefing on Sri Lanka. Earlier in the day, at a meeting of the Consultative Committee on Humanitarian Assistance (CCHA) chaired by Minister of Disaster Management and Human Rights Mahinda Samarasinghe and attended by Defense Secretary Gotabaya Rajapaksa and Senior Presidential Advisor Basil Rajapaksa, Charge emphasized serious U.S. concern over the humanitarian consequences of fighting and reports of large civilian casualties in the safe zone. He noted that, if true, the alleged use of heavy artillery violated the President's commitments, most recently to the diplomatic community on May 7. Samarasinghe categorically denied the government's use of heavy weapons in the safe zone. He stated that those killed were LTTE cadres, not civilians, and said that reports of civilian casualties were based on reporting by a government health official in the safe zone who was being manipulated by the LTTE. Like the Foreign Minister, Samarasinghe alleged that the reports were LTTE propaganda timed to influence discussions of Sri Lanka at UN

meetings in New York and Geneva.

ICRC FERRY UPDATE

¶8. (SBU) The ICRC-flagged ferry "Green Ocean" returned to the safe zone on May 9 and on May 11, each time carrying 27-30 MT of food, and returning with medical evacuees and bystanders. The ICRC has evacuated approximately 14,000 persons from the conflict zone since February 10. Additional food shipments and medevacs by the "Green Ocean" are planned for May 12 and 13. The Government plans to provide WFP and ICRC use of the "Dublin" to transport larger amounts of food aid in to the conflict zone. ICRC will attempt to ship 200-500 metric tons of food during the week of May 11-17. However,

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this operation will require both sides to significantly scale back fighting for at least 72 hours. Charge will continue to urge the GSL to stop fighting in order to allow food aid in and to avoid civilian casualties.

JOURNALISTS DEPORTED FOR REPORTING
ON IDP CAMPS

¶9. (SBU) Three journalists from UK's Channel 4 were deported this weekend following their May 5 report on alleged rape and lack of food and water in IDP camps in Vavuniya. The three were detained in Trincomalee, brought back to Colombo, and deported from Sri Lanka on the morning of May 10. The reporter claims he received a phone call from Defense Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapaksa in which he said, "You have been accusing my soldiers of raping civilians? Your visa is cancelled, you will be deported. You can report what you like about this country, but from your own country, not from here."

UN SPOKESMAN TO BE PNG'D?

¶10. (SBU) UN Spokesman in Colombo Gordon Weiss informed Pol Chief that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has threatened to declare him "persona non grata" and rescind his visa. The Government has taken offense at Weiss' use of the term "bloodbath" in an AP interview describing the situation of civilians in the conflict zone. (Embassy notes that the term has been used frequently by UN Undersecretary General for Humanitarian Affairs John Holmes in describing the crisis in Sri Lanka.)

MOORE